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Action Learning and the Creative Industries

The efficacy of an action learning set in building collaboration between the university
and the creative industries

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Abstract

In the UK, the creative sector has been identified as a key strand in the economic recovery strategy. Composed of mostly micro and small enterprises often grouping together for particular commissions and projects, there is a tendency to operate primarily through a series of networks made up of peers. This paper presents the outcomes of a ‘peer to peer business programme’, or action learning set, involving ten participants from the creative sector over a period of six months. The programme was based on a ‘Six-Squared’ model where participants would address their own needs alongside participating in, and developing further understanding of, action learning sets in order to establish sets with others. Assessment of outcomes indicated that the programme allowed participants to develop new skills with peers, network and strengthen relationships and collaborate in a university programme. The paper concludes by suggesting that, within the context of a growing and vibrant creative industries sector and increasing pressures on universities to engage with the business community, it is essential to develop flexible, peer-led and innovative models of collaboration.

Keywords: peer learning, collaboration, intermediaries, creative industries

Introduction

Despite the creative sector’s complexity, its resistance to definition and the limitations of traditional economic measures (Potts et al 2008; Holden et al 2011; UK Universities 2010), in the UK the creative industry sector has grown by an average of 5% per annum between 1997 and 2007 compared to an average of 3% for the whole of the economy, and accounts for up to 6.2% of UK Gross Value Added (DCMS 2010). It is a sector characterised by high levels of self-employment with one in three creative graduates running their own business and/or working in a freelance capacity (Ball et al 2010). It maintains a highly flexible dynamic with

micro and small enterprises often grouping together for particular commissions and projects (Taylor 2006; Pratt 2005) with a tendency to operate primarily through a series of networks made up of peers. (Gloor 2006; Handke 2004; Henry 2007).

For the purposes of this research, creative industries takes its definition from the 2001 Government's Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) national mapping exercise and in so doing defined the sector as "those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property" (DCMS 2001, p4) This includes advertising, architecture, art & antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film & video, interactive leisure software, music, performing arts, publishing, software & computer services and television & radio. Whilst this definition has since been debated and amended it was the first time a nation had attempted to categorise a sector and from this, triggered other nations to undertake their own studies into the creative sector (Higgs and Cunningham 2008).

According to The Work Foundation (2011), the creative industries have been identified as a key strand in the UK's economic recovery strategy, contributing to competitive advantage through to 2020 and beyond. Similarly, universities have a key role to play in contributing to the nations's competitive portfolio, generating innovation, high level skills and creative thinking (Universities UK 2010). In short, we would suggest therefore that it is imperative to explore how these two sectors could develop effective strategies for engagement and longer term collaboration.

The challenge is that universities are multi-faceted institutions, comprising of units and organizational structures that must adhere to long established protocols, systems and mechanisms to control and preserve quality (Gibb 2009). This organizational structure has implications for collaboration between the university and the creative sector. As a consequence, it has been difficult to attract participants from the creative sector to courses (both accredited and non-accredited) and events, especially if costs are incurred.¹

However, at an Open Space event (Owen 2008) organized by Leeds Metropolitan University in 2010 Directors and chief executives from the creative sector agreed that leaders, such as

¹ Taking into account the cost of the course plus the cost of the loss of a day's work.

themselves required facilitated peer learning within a structured and supportive framework. In response to this, an action learning set, or what was later promoted as a ‘peer to peer business development’ programme, was launched. This was promoted as a business-led opportunity, responding to an identified need; providing business support within an appropriate peer-led framework and would be facilitated by the university. This was an opportunity to test an approach already found to be successful with leaders of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) in providing practical opportunities to unpick real and complex problems, identify and discuss solutions and learn from peers. (Clarke et al 2006)

Research undertaken by the Northern Leadership Academy, provides further evidence to suggest that this approach is successful in SMEs due to their prioritization for survival over growth; their tendency for poor strategic planning and focus on operational activities (Thorpe et al 2008). These characteristics are found to be predominant within the creative industries sector, however the creative industries, with its less traditional management structures, or as Florida terms the “no-collar workplace”, may well replace the traditional business model of “hierarchical systems of control” with more “self-management, peer recognition and pressure and intrinsic forms of motivation,” (2002.:13).

Within this context the following research presents the outcomes of a ‘peer to peer business programme, or action learning set, involving ten participants from the creative sector over a period of six months at Leeds Metropolitan University in 2010/2011. From this we seek to answer the following questions :

1. Would action learning engender better collaboration between the university and the creative sector in addition to meeting professional development needs?
2. If so, how effective is this engagement?
3. And since an intermediary (project manager) from the creative sector was in post at the time, consideration of what significance this role has to play in the collaboration?

The project

External funding was available and subsidized the full cost of participating, but as a one-off opportunity, it was important to plan for sustainability within the project. We based the

programme on the 'Six-Squared' model developed by Pittaway et al (2009) where participants would address their own needs alongside participating in, and developing further understanding of, action learning sets in order to establish sets with others. Two facilitators were selected based on their previous action learning facilitation experience with SMEs

Following a brief recruitment campaign involving personal invitation and telephone discussion to explain the programme, ten creative practitioners confirmed their participation. This included two heads of department and a director from the performing arts sector; a chief executive, a director and a head of department from the visual arts sector; two freelancers, ie micro businesses; a local authority cultural arts officer and a director from a regional arts organization. It was a deliberate intention to ensure that participants reflected the broad range across the creative sector. This would ensure there would be access to various business perspectives and experiences throughout the programme. Each participant submitted a brief supporting statement as part of the application process stating what they would wish to gain from the experience and why 'peer to peer' learning appealed to them. This was to ensure that there was 'buy-in' into the programme as well as providing useful data for the research.

The programme involved one meeting per month for six months, with each session of three hours long. It was launched with an introductory session led by the facilitators taking participants through a process of establishing ground rules for action learning such as confidentiality and exploring open question techniques. The following sessions were then divided into two comprising of ninety minutes input from the facilitators and ninety minutes of action learning set practice. So, for example, at the end of session one, participants identified conflict management as an issue that they would like to explore, hence session two engaged participants in identifying and describing disruptive 'behaviour types' and developing strategies to manage these behaviours. This was followed by the first action learning set.

In session three, the group discussed action learning set ethics such as commitment to the group and attendance; leadership styles and the social construction of leadership (Grint 2005). Participants were also asked to complete a self-reflection questionnaire (Pedler 2008) in order to review their own organizational readiness for action learning. The second action learning set took place followed by feedback from the first action learning set. In session four, participants prepared pitches to potential recruits for their action learning set followed

by a third action learning set and feedback from the previous action learning set. Session five began with an action learning set facilitated by a participant, followed by discussion on the facilitation and the problem holder's reflections on the process. The final session began with the fifth action learning set followed by a review of the impact of their experience and how they would take their experience forward into their own networks. See Figure (i) below for a summary of the programme.

Session and date	Activity
Session 1 : September 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductions; ground rules; question techniques and relationship building
Session 2 : October 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing conflict • Action Learning Set session 1
Session 3 : November 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning set ethics; leadership styles. • Review Action Learning Actions 1 • Action Learning Set session 2
Session 4 : January 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of action set process and making the case for action learning in your organisation • Review Action Learning Actions 2 • Action Learning Set 3
Semi structured interviews	
Session 5 : February 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action Learning Set 4 • Reflections from a 'problem holders' perspective • Review Action Learning Actions 3
Session 6 : March 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action Learning Set 5 • Review Action Learning Actions 4 • Taking Action Learning Set practice forward

Figure 1 : The Peer to Peer Business Development Programme.

Data and Analysis Process

As part of the application process, each participant provided a brief written statement outlining their personal and professional aspirations and experience if any, of participating in a peer to peer development programme. The intermediary made notes from phone conversations clarifying issues around content, time commitment and target group. Notes were also made of observations throughout the programme and finally individual semi-structured interviews were conducted between session four and five with all participants as well as the two business facilitators. This involved questions on their experience of the programme, their key learnings and reflections on the process of action learning. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. For the purpose of the research and anonymity, each participant and their business have not been identified.

Better collaboration and meeting professional development needs ?

To address the first objective, it was key to understand what factors had influenced the participants' decision to participate and whether expectations had been met. Three themes emerge indicating that participating in the programme was an opportunity to :

- i. develop new skills with peers
- ii. network and strengthen relationships
- iii. collaborate in a university programme

i. Developing new skills with peers

In the initial application process nine out of ten participants stated that they were participating in the programme as a vehicle to develop new skills alongside peers. This was evident from both their application forms and interviews conducted part way through the programme. Each of the nine participants, despite their positions as leaders within their area of business, all identified a shortfall in their own learning and a belief that they needed to address this, whatever level of experience they already had. Interestingly, it was clear that they were not stating that they were incompetent as practitioners as a result of not receiving training, but there was a common self-perception that a deficit existed within their own professional development and there was benefit to working with others in a similar position. For example, Participant A, despite his leadership role within his organization had not had any formal professional development and acknowledged the value of accessing this opportunity:

I have never received any formal or structured training or learning on techniques, and I would value this as a way to improve productivity.

Participant B recognized that working with other creative businesses could help progress her own, but she needed to develop skills in making this work.

It is timely to be looking at and understanding models of self and collaborative support in developing business and business activity and peer to peer is one that I haven't had any training or support with.

The interviews also revealed how valuable it was to have time and space with peers to reflect on their own learning; to expose tacit knowledge; and to explore implications on their business. Participant C reflected how action learning had enriched the dialogue, enabling her to explore ‘wicked issues’ at a deeper level:

It’s about recognizing and finding those balls and chains, having a good look at them and working out how to pick the locks with the help of a group of people.

A challenge for business leaders is managing the feelings of isolation and the possibility of becoming inward looking (Thorpe et al 2008). Participant D identified how it was beneficial to talk with others to gain different perspectives from peers.

To be able to get that outside look in particular at this point where you are just on a treadmill ... and to be able to sit in that room with people from different organisations ... that was really really valuable. It was fantastic.

The examples above and evidence from the other participants correlates with Pittaway et al (2009) and Gibb (2009), in that business leaders of SMEs experience effective and relevant learning when working on their real problems alongside peers. This was illustrated as expressed by Participant E,

Every single member of that group has surprised me, every last one of them. I have been able to go, I hadn’t thought about something in that way, or you’re expressing that in an incredibly perceptive way, or your analysis of that is revealing.

The participants demonstrated a commitment to wanting to learn and an expectation that they would engage in a learning process as evidenced above. This practical and experiential opportunity was a key driver for applying to the programme. As Revans (1984 p.51) states “by talking about things, one may claim to ‘know’ them, but only by actually doing them can one demonstrate, alike and to oneself and others, that one does, in truth, ‘know’ them... there can be no learning without action, and no action without learning”

This theme is reinforced by Allman (2009 quoted in Ledwith & Springett, 2010, pp. 176-177) in that “People enter into discussions in order to articulate what they already know or think

... Dialogue, in contrast and complete opposition, involves the critical investigation of knowledge or thinking. Rather than focusing only on what we think, dialogue requires us to ask of each other and ourselves why we think what we do. In other words, it requires us to “problematise” knowledge”. It is this praxis that transforms the ‘everyday’ experience into a learning development opportunity.

When asked, participants stated that the key skills developed from participating in the programme included an improvement in their leadership style; increased confidence in undertaking their professional role; improvement in their facilitation skills and a broadening of their repertoires of talk. As Participant E states :

There was a real quantum change in the way that people were thinking and talking and real levels of honesty as well

ii. **Networking and strengthening relationships**

This second theme emerged as a key benefit to the participants. As well as acknowledging the contribution of peers in developing individual skill sets, five out of the ten participants specifically expressed the value of networking as part of the learning process. Participants C and E claim that networking with purpose was a key driver for them attending the programme.

I never miss a chance to network with people working in my field...I knew there would be a new, well not necessarily a new network, but it would be at a different level.

It was within weeks of me starting so it was a lot about me finding a network of peers, trying to get a grip of the context which was rapidly and inexplicably changing ... and so the idea that it would pull in the depth and diversity across the creative industries ...the networking was very important for me.

Networking within the creative sector is a vital component for business; finding new contacts and professional development. (Dawson & Gilmour, 2009; DCMS 2008; Harvey 2010; Henry 2007; The Work Foundation 2007). Having a network of peers at the heart of this programme reflected ‘real’ entrepreneurial business practice, contributed to creating the

business environment and provided a trusted source of support to convert into potential business collaborations. As Participant G remarks,

Its definitely made my relationship with (Participant H) better in fact we are looking at doing a joint proposal and that's what you'd want out of your time commitment ... you would want to make sure that it was adding to your business for why you were doing it and you would want to make sure you were creating new opportunities further, outside this box.

As Trehan and Pedler (2009 p.37) suggest, action learning “is an important development in management and leadership development because it promotes a deepening of critical thinking on the daily realities of organisational life and does this by emphasizing the value of collective as well as individual reflection”

Networking within the context of the creative sector with the complex interchanging and interdependency of opportunities and project possibilities meant that for some it took a little time to develop trust and openness to sharing sensitive information. Whilst this was not picked up as an issue by the facilitators, there were moments where some of the discussion strayed into ‘delicate’ areas which could have readily undermined the newly established relationships if it were not for the trust between participants. As Huxham and Vangen argue, collaboration involves risk taking and so trust is vital to make the collaboration work. (ibid 2008) As Participant B expressed,

I think we understood the confidentiality and trust, I think that was openly talked about, but I still think it's really hard to share sensitive information with people because you normally choose who you wish to do that with.

Degrees of confidence and trust developed throughout the programme and impacted on how much participants engaged with the process. This, we speculate may well have continued to improve should the action learning set been established over a longer period as participants noted that with each session this was getting better.

It was clear that creating opportunities to network within a business environment, developing trust and confidence did impact positively on the participants' experience. They were able to

draw upon each other as a resource as well as be a resource to their peers, and reflecting their ways of learning in the workplace. An additional impact was created from being able to provide time to reflect and critique this process of interchange and dialogue.

But how important and relevant was it to collaborate with a university?

iii. **Collaborating in a university programme**

Out of ten participants, seven participants remarked positively to university involvement, in that it brings an implicit value and credibility to the learning offer. Of the three participants who did not find it an influencing factor, two stated categorically that it didn't influence them at all and one did not realize the project had come from a university. Pittaway et al's (2009) analysis of motivational drivers for participation also found that entrepreneurs engaging in action learning sets facilitated by a university valued the theoretical underpinning of a learning programme.

However, in this instance despite the enthusiasm for a university's involvement in the programme, only two participants had read the briefing papers on action learning emailed prior to the start of the programme and of the remaining four, only two had looked at the papers briefly. As practitioners, who learn on the job, this is not untypical and again supports the evidence that the learning experience needs to be real, relevant and practice based in the first instance. (Thorpe et al 2008)

Seven participants stated that the university partner brings an implicit value to the experience. And interestingly for some, also contributes to the sense of trust mentioned earlier. For example Participants C, E and H commenting respectively,

I think subconsciously it gives ... a credibility to it and a kind of quality assurance in that it's a university maybe more of that sense of learning and study.

I think this relationship we need with critical thinking, its important.

I think it brings enormous credibility actually and holds you through some of those spaces when you're not sure what's going on and not sure what your learnings going to be... it develops a lot of trust in what the offer is.

The role of the intermediary

Anticipating some of the challenges of developing a programme led by a university, the project design included an intermediary role (project manager) with a creative sector background. This was to bridge the relationship, culturally and organisationally between the creative sector and the university. The role included personally inviting the participants based on existing relationships in the first instance, as well as supporting them throughout the programme. This was appreciated and commented upon by participants, for example participant F states :

It was nothing to do with hype but it was very much about you do opt to do things because of the people you know who are inviting you ... and I was the same.

Both the university and cultural and creative sectors tend to have their own language, their own organizational structures, systems and processes (Gibb 2002). They also have their own barriers to engagement and as a result, the intermediary's role was to create a 'porosity' between the two cultures and transcend potential 'unknowns' that may impact on the group's learning experience. It was important therefore to maintain contact with participants outside the action learning set programme, ensure that venue details such as location and refreshments were readily available and to host the sessions. This was a key role, ensuring that organizationally, the project ran smoothly between the participating sectors. (Thelwell 2007; Oakley and Selwood 2010). Evidence suggests that this impacted positively on the collaboration and was noted by participants, for example, Participant C states:

You knew where we were at and kept a track of where were at and all that sort of thing ... I don't think that should be underestimated, actually as in the importance of hosting, not in 'here's your tea and coffee and put your coat over there' but actually acts like a host in the social sense of something. And as I observed, they're a group of people in that room who spend a lot of time taking care of other people and not a lot of time taking care of themselves ... as a result I think hosting is very important.

This was both a surprising and significant find in the project. We had not fully appreciated the extent to which participants had based commitment and engagement on this additional set of factors. Significantly, it was the direct invitation that had played a role in differentiating this programme from all the other available business development courses. Using personal networks, communicating directly and valuing the relationships throughout, were key to being able to implement an impactful programme.

Dawson and Gilmore (2009) argue that from their findings within galleries, museums and the broader visual arts sector, an intermediary role increases the chance of better relationships and potential sustainability. This role was seen as playing a key part in interpreting between different cultures and ‘jargon’ as being one of the barriers to effective collaboration.

As Participant E states :

There are different languages at play, neither the language of the arts but I think you do act as a mediator between two worlds that do have different ways of thinking and speaking. It moves us away from that bish bash bosh business training attitude.

This has implications for future projects and collaborations between the university and the creative sector, in that dynamics, networks and language pertinent to that sector does need to be taken into account, as well as time for effective relationship building in order to develop trust and promote risk taking.

Recommendations for Future Programmes

Despite this research involving a relatively small sample over a six month period, there are some interesting and pertinent observations that do correlate with existing research.

From these observations, a number of recommendations can be summarized as follows :

1. There is value in university-led business development programmes recognized by the non-university sector.
2. An intermediary who has knowledge of the sector involved in a programme is an important component in the process.
3. Peer to peer or action learning is effective in developing skills when working with businesses from the creative and cultural sector.

4. More time does need to be scheduled in the programme to embed trust and deepen the learning experience.
5. Whilst not explored in this article in great depth, identifying appropriate facilitators is necessary to ensure awareness of the sector - as with the intermediary in point 2.
6. Recognition of the value of relationship building prior to, during and after the programme are all vital aspects in generating an effective and impactful experience between two very different sectors.

Conclusion

The creative industries is a transient and dynamic sector made up of micro, small and medium enterprises operating flexibly through a series of complex networks and collaborations on a project by project basis. The university sector on the other hand is multi-faceted, comprising of mechanisms to preserve quality assurance, established protocols and processes. Within the context of a growing and vibrant creative industries sector and increasing pressures on universities to engage with the business community, it is essential to develop flexible, peer-led and innovative models of collaboration.

This research project was an opportunity to create a university collaborative project through an action learning set drawing on university expertise and tested peer development methodologies. It responded to and reflected entrepreneurial business practice by enabling participants to experience different repertoires of talk; highlighting the role of others in resolving complex issues; developing participants' levels of confidence in particular management areas, all underpinned by opportunities to network – integral to doing business. For some participants it was an affirmation of their skills that had become intrinsic to them. Exposing this tacit knowledge, and then sharing this expertise was in itself a beneficial outcome of their involvement in the programme and a contributory factor to increasing their entrepreneurial practice.

The research also revealed that there was additional value in involving an intermediary from the appropriate sector to facilitate relationship development between the two different sectors.

Finally, a number of recommendations, drawn from the research observations, provides some insight for those wishing to develop collaborations between these two exciting and complex sectors.

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